

Washington Post Reporter Loses Job over Blog

Washington Post staff writer lost his job in April 2008 after he revealed he was also writing for an unrelated sports blog. Commentators have said the episode was the latest example of a growing problem facing mainstream media outlets regarding employee-published online content.

Michael Tunison, who worked in *The Post's* Montgomery County bureau, had been writing several posts each week on the professional football blog Kissing Suzy Kolber since 2006 under the pseudonym "Christmas Ape." Kissing Suzy Kolber describes itself as "a humor site dedicated to the NFL." According to an April 17 post on the AOL Sports Fanhouse blog describing the events, the site is among the most popular NFL blogs on the Internet.

The blog entry in which Tunison identified himself was peppered with profanities and entitled "Drunk Blogger Staggers into the Light." In it, Tunison refers to *The Washington Post* as a "dying medium." Tunison also writes about getting drunk the day of Super Bowl XL and the post includes a picture of him with a sports mascot.

In a later post, Tunison said the reason he revealed his identity was in the interest of full disclosure, because he had started getting paid for his work at the blog. He also said that much of the blog's content involved "taking shots" at other sports writers, and he did not wish to publish those comments anonymously. The posts are available at <http://kissingsuzykolber.uproxx.com/tag/xmas-ape/page/4>.

In an April 17 Editor & Publisher story, *Washington Post* Executive Editor Leonard Downie Jr. confirmed that Tunison no longer worked at the newspaper and had left his job, but would not specify whether he resigned or was fired. The *Editor & Publisher* story can be found online at http://www.editorandpublisher.com/eandp/news/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1003790987.

In portions of an e-mail reprinted in Sports Illustrated's Media Circus blog, Tunison said that he was told to resign or he would be terminated. The Media Circus story can be found online at http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2008/writers/richard_deitsch/04/20/column.421/index.html.

“We have standards for people’s outside work,” Downie told *Editor & Publisher*. “You need to clear it with your editors here before and it should not be a conflict of interest.”

The April 17 *Editor & Publisher* story included an e-mail response from Tunison to Downie’s comments. “There was no conflict of interest between my writing for Kissing Suzy Kolber and my work for *The Washington Post*. The blog is not a journalistic endeavor and it is not something I was paid for until I revealed my identity. It is a humor blog about the NFL, whereas my job for the paper was to cover local news in a suburban county outside Washington, D.C.”

The *Editor & Publisher* story included pertinent portions of the official *Post* stylebook: “This newspaper is pledged to avoid conflict of interest or the appearance of conflict of interest, wherever and whenever possible . . . we work for no one except *The Washington Post* without permission from supervisors. Many outside activities and jobs are incompatible with the proper performance of work on an independent newspaper . . . Our private behavior as well as our professional behavior must not bring discredit to our profession or to *The Post*.”

Washington Post Ombudsman Deborah Howell wrote April 27 that “it is no surprise that Tunison is no longer around if you read the blog, which contains obscene, sexist and racist comments that won’t be repeated here.” Howell also discussed several angry e-mails *The Post* had received and concluded with some advice for young journalists: “Don’t hide your other job. Don’t embarrass the editors. And use that talent without posting a picture of yourself drunk.”

Newsrooms across the country are reacting to staffers’ blogging in different ways. For example, the Web site journalism.co.uk reported April 29 that the Thomson Reuters company has implemented a policy that, although allowing employees to maintain blogs, prohibits them from using blogs for internal communication or for airing differences with colleagues or the company itself. The report is available at <http://blogs.journalism.co.uk/editors/2008/04/29/thomson-reuters-internalblogging-ban-for-staff/>.

Other news outlets, such as *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*, have precise guidelines for personal blogging, according to a story from the June/July issue of *American Journalism Review* (AJR). The *Los Angeles Times* requires approval of a supervisor, and approval will not be granted unless the blog meets the paper’s journalistic standards. *The New York Times* requires that journalists avoid writing about any topics they cover professionally.

According to an October 9, 2006 story posted on the CBS News Web site, network standards state that all personal blogs written by CBS News employees must be approved by the Senior Vice President of Standards and Special Projects or the President of CBS News.

“There has always been outside approval required for outside speeches, outside writing — books, magazines, op-eds,” said Linda Mason, CBS News Senior Vice President, Standards and Special Projects. “And that’s so that, again, your opinions don’t reflect badly on CBS, or in any way show bias towards one side or the other. On blogs, that’s a whole new thing. We can’t have people having personal blogs venting their opinions.” The article is available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2006/10/06/publiceye/Entry2071663.shtml>.

Specific policies regarding blogging are becoming more common, but it has been a slow process, according to *AJR*. Editors and news organizations have been dealing with blogs for about a decade, and they continue to grow as a part of how people interact with the world.

“A lot of the people we’re hiring today have a prior history (online), a digital footprint so to speak, and you can’t erase that footprint no matter how hard you try,” Anthony Moor, deputy managing editor/interactive for The Dallas Morning News said in the *AJR* story. “I think you are seeing news organizations trying to grapple with this.”

Some publications, such as The Miami Herald and The Washington Post do not address personal blogging at all in their employee manuals, according to *AJR*. They instead rely on broad policies that cover general behavioral expectations of newsroom employees.

“Bloggers like to think of themselves as unique and special in every way, but (they) still have to conform with other policies about personal behavior reflecting on their professional work,” Washington Post Managing Editor Philip Bennett said in *AJR*. “We treat personal blogs the way we treat any sort of speech outside of what people do for the Washington Post.”

In an article on *Cyberjournalist.net*, a Web site that calls itself a “news and resource site that focuses on how the Internet, convergence and new technologies are changing the media,” J.D. Lasica, an author and commentator on social media, wrote that blogs threaten the traditional newsroom structure.

Lasica wrote that mainstream media outlets fear blogs by journalists. “Blogging empowers individuals at the expense of the carefully constructed newsroom hierarchy. It busts down the bureaucracy into a level playing field, a

democratic playing field where your ideas count more than your pecking order in the organization's flow chart." The article is available at <http://www.cyberjournalist.net/news/000361.php>.

Tom Regan, a news blogger for National Public Radio and cochairman of a 2007 panel discussion at a conference for the Online News Association, said the most prominent factor for determining where a journalist will stand on the blogging issue is age.

"The older journalists felt that it compromised your position as a reporter," Regan said, according to AJR. "Younger journalists felt it's a whole new era, we all use Facebook, we're all used to sharing everything with everyone, so why shouldn't we as journalists? It was a real big split."

— Jacob Parsley
Silha Research Assistant